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# Preputial phantasies in Lisa Braver Moss's *The Measure of His Grief*

## ABSTRACT

*Penile circumcision remains a topic that divides people. This article considers Lisa Braver Moss's novel, The Measure of His Grief, which tells the story of a character who begins to reconsider his own circumcision. Over the course of the novel, Dr Sandy Waldman studies circumcision and the foreskin, as well as anti-circumcision activism and foreskin restoration. This article thus aims to read the novel in light of foreskin restoration and intactivist politics. Additionally, this article considers the relationship amongst the foreskin, circumcision and masculinity.*

## KEYWORDS

circumcision  
foreskin  
anti-circumcision  
foreskin restoration  
masculinity  
fiction  
intactivism

Lisa Braver Moss's *The Measure of His Grief* tells the story of Dr Sandy Waldman, who, at his father's *shiva*, begins to experience a sharp pain in his groin, ultimately, the tip of his penis. The pain cannot be explained. He seeks out the advice of colleagues at his medical facility. No answer can be found. He then begins to explore circumcision and postulates that his circumcision may be the cause of the pains – despite having been done when he was but a week old. Throughout the narrative, then, Sandy studies the politics of circumcision, reading medical reports and finding a community studying the same.

*The Measure of His Grief* may be a strange novel on a strange topic, but to imagine it as such is to disregard its complexity. Likewise, it may be a strange

topic for a woman to consider in her first novel. But it is not a new topic to Lisa Braver Moss, she explains:

I began writing articles on this topic in the late Eighties, after the birth of my sons. We're Jewish and they were circumcised, but that decision haunted me because while it reflected my tradition, it did not reflect my spirituality or, I later realized, my ethics.

(Rufus 2010: n.pag.)

Thus, as a mother, she considers circumcision in light of religion, spirituality and ethics. Braver Moss explains that the idea 'started percolating when a very credible, well-educated Jewish friend told me had re-experienced his circumcision trauma while in a trancelike state' (Rufus 2010: n.pag.), and this caused her to ponder:

What if a Jewish man had a flashback to his own circumcision? What if he then started to rail against this tradition – and thereby deepened his understanding of Judaism and his commitment to it? When it occurred to me to add in the phenomenon of foreskin 'restoration' the deal was sealed.

(Rufus 2010: n.pag.)

It is the latter aspect, foreskin restoration, that motivates much of this article, but what is so striking here is the backstory to the novel. Lisa Braver Moss begins to question circumcision as a Jewish mother and along the way finds herself entering the world of circumcision and anti-circumcision politics. Today, 'intactivism' is still circumspect, but it is becoming a louder voice in these debates, with a keen focus on ensuring genital integrity and autonomy.

Focusing more specifically on the novel, *The Measure of His Grief* is a novel of inheritance, recalling here Jacques Derrida's argument that circumcision is 'an inscribing inscription', which takes place in a 'very singular moment' and becomes 'the document of an archive' (Derrida 1996: 20). Circumcision, thus, at least within this particular religious context 'maintains a reference to the graphic mark and to repetition' (Derrida 1996: 20). Derrida's description of circumcision is what motivates much of *The Measure of His Grief*, insofar as Sandy is pre-eminently concerned with the meanings of circumcision as a Jewish man, but conflicted by those meanings when confronted by scientific reasons as a medical doctor. In terms of the medical side of circumcision, which is to say, the prophylactic values of circumcision, I want to note from the outset that the jury is, at best, hung. There are arguments on all sides about whether or not there is prophylactic value in circumcision, some arguments more convincing than others, but confusion seems to reign supreme. Nonetheless, at first glance, *The Measure of His Grief* seemingly begs for a psychoanalytic critique, after all, we have a son at the death of his father experiencing pain in his penis, almost as if the Oedipal complex meets castration anxiety meets mourning and melancholia. And my reading here is undoubtedly affected by that impulse, but also my deep sense of interest in the modification of the body as identity making. This article, thus, contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the foreskin and circumcision, and specifically seeks to place *The Measure of His Grief* in the context of anti-circumcision activism or intactivism. More particularly, this article seeks to think through the deep connections amongst the foreskin, circumcision and masculinity,

while also attending to the cultural meanings attached to them. Masculinity is central to the novel because, as has been long documented, 'the penis stands in for and up for the man' (Potts 2000: 85). In thinking about masculinity, I seek to show how the author crafts a masculinity that departs from hegemonic norms, from toxic masculinity, and towards a caring masculinity where a group of men can talk seriously about their concerns. In some ways, I suggest that the masculinity considered in this novel is more inclusive or welcoming of divergent experiences thereby contributing to that body of scholarship. I will close with a brief discussion of the importance of thinking about anti-circumcision activism in the context of genitals and genital transformation.

What does it mean to begin to think about one's missing foreskin? What does it mean to miss one's foreskin? Why, at this point in our historicity, do we see the rise of anti-circumcision movements? This article will not provide all the answers, but it does afford some ways of thinking about these questions. Throughout much of the literature against circumcision, of which there is a growing and vast body, we find what I would call a fairly common narrative: the circumcised penis is missing out on something that the uncircumcised (or intact) penis is not. Consider just some of the language: 'the sexual functioning of the American circumcised penis is also impaired' (1998: 24), Jim Bigelow tells his reader in *The Joy of Uncircumcising: History, Myths, Psychology, Restoration, Sexual Pleasure and Human Rights*, a book that is explicitly named in *The Measure of His Grief*, and which a character calls 'the required text' (Moss 2010: 265). Bigelow's book includes a variety of anecdotes from men, for example, a man reports: 'the greatest disadvantage of circumcision, in my view, is the awful loss of sensitivity and function when the foreskin is removed' (1998: 15). Another man explains,

I am a 47-year-old secondary mathematics teacher in Oklahoma. Although I wasn't circumcised at birth, I did decide to get circumcised at age 28, mainly because I had heard it was much easier to 'keep clean' when a male is circumcised. Although it was a little easier to keep fresh and clean after I was circumcised, I found that the negatives of circumcision far outweigh the minor benefit of slight improvement in hygiene. I wound up being very sorry that I had become circumcised because of a major loss of sexual enjoyment after circumcision.

(Bigelow 1998: 19)

And finally, another man explains the failure of his marriage, which, incidentally, also happens to Sandy Waldman in *The Measure of His Grief*.

I am a 24-year-old male in my second marriage. My first marriage fell apart because of what didn't happen in the bedroom. I was constantly on edge because of sexual frustration. Now, my second marriage is slumping in the bedroom. I have little trouble with erections and ejaculations. My problems are lack of intensity, numbness during and after intercourse, and self-consciousness about the appearance of my circumcised penis.

(Bigelow 1998: 25)

I cite these examples because they inform the ways in which Moss constructs and imagines the foreskin in *The Measure of His Grief*. The foreskin is seemingly endowed with power: exceptional and extraordinary sensitivity. Moss,

of course, is not alone; most sex manuals mention the benefits of foreskin in terms of pleasure advantages. In other words, one cannot really and fully experience sex with a circumcised penis because something is always missing. In each of the examples, then, there is a sense of what the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2012) has called 'missing out'. In essence, missing out is 'what we fantasize about, what we long for', namely 'the experiences, the things, the people that are absent', and as Phillips explains, 'it is the absence of what we need that makes us think, that makes us cross and sad' (2012: xi). The circumcised penis is always about a lack, a lack of a foreskin, a lack of agency in choosing circumcision, a lack of full sexual capacity, and so on.

Throughout the novel, the narrative revolves around this idea of lack. Sandy, for instance, begins to advocate against circumcision, but he never imagines, until it is pointed out to him, that he could restore his foreskin. That is, in a sense, there is a restorative potential that could compensate for the lack of the foreskin. Once he is confronted by the solution of foreskin restoration, Sandy is, admittedly, confused:

There was something decidedly fetishistic about the whole business, Sandy thought. It was one thing to be anti-circumcision, quite another to be so preoccupied with one's lost prepuce that one was willing to join an unlikely fraternity of men who gradually stretched their penile skin the way members of African tribes stretched their lips or necks or earlobes. But then, it was not the remediation of circumcision that was bizarre and tribal; it was circumcision itself. Besides, Sandy was hardly in any position to be judgmental.

(Moss 2010: 253–54)

Sandy's reflections here are, in some ways, rather common when confronted by foreskin restoration, that is, one might dismiss it as 'decidedly fetishistic', and then begin to ponder and ruminate on the idea, and then come to ask questions about circumcision itself, rather than the missing foreskin. Thus, the shift is towards the ethics and politics of circumcision itself, rather than the desire to 'fix' oneself, as it were. Throughout this section of the novel, readers learn about foreskin restoration, and especially, and perhaps curiously, the homosociality of foreskin restoration.

In her didactic manner, Moss informs her reader not only of where Sandy is going, but also how these men 'restore' their foreskin as the 'process of stretching the residual penile shaft skin so that, over time, new tissue was formed to cover the head of the penis' (2010: 253). My speaking of didacticism is less a criticism, and more a comment on the style that is unfolding here. Moss is *teaching* her readers, while telling a story. Though Sandy is initially confused by foreskin restoration, he does, as we might expect in this novel, begin the process of foreskin restoration, explaining to his wife (from whom he has separated as his life has spiralled apart after his father's death), 'I mean I'm feeling more whole. I think I might have a little more sensation' (Moss 2010: 283). Once more, we see this idea of 'missing out'. He thinks, which does not mean he knows, that he has a 'little more sensation' (Moss 2010: 283) – that is, this is more affective than rational. There is certainly much to be said about the psychosomatic and foreskin restoration, and much research remains to be done on foreskin restoration, especially in terms of psychosexual medicine. What is clear to me, at least in the space of this novel, is that the foreskin has become a kind of phantasy for the circumcised character. A phantasy, as I

understand it, is a kind of 'logical thought, assembled with perfect syntax of words and expression of all the links between words representing things' and further that 'phantasy is the most common type of thinking, governed by the pleasure principle' (Valls 2019: 230). Thus, in the case of restoration, the foreskin becomes the phantasy, that once achieved, is no longer a phantasy but is part of his reality. If the man with a circumcised penis had a foreskin, he would have a better penis, a more sensitive penis. In these phantasies, then, we have an idea that an intact or uncircumcised penis has some 'pleasure advantage' to borrow the language of *Cosmo's Red-Hot Sex Secrets*, a popular sex manual that encourages couples to enhance and spice up their sex lives, so much so that it teaches readers how to mimic the foreskin:

If he's circumcised, give him a 'faux foreskin'. 'Just wrap a section of your own hair around his rod, making twisting motions as you work your hair up and down the ride of his penis' [...]. The silky strands will mimic the same feel-good friction of a foreskin. Got short hair? Substitute a soft swatch of cloth, like velvet. The possibilities are limited only by your creativity.

(Promaulayko 2011: 77)

The foreskin becomes something that is missing as he lacks the 'pleasure advantage', but substitutes can be found, and he can experience the fullness of sex if the foreskin is mimicked.

In what remains, then, I wish to position the importance of homosociality to foreskin restoration, that is, foreskin restoration seemingly depends upon relationality or a community. That is, one has to learn how to restore foreskin. Sandy, thus, joins a group of men all restoring their foreskins, and he learns – as does the reader – about the mechanisms to restore the foreskin, which often involves taping and the use of weights. Consider the following scene:

'In the first stages of stretching', Everett explained, 'the glans and the body of the penis provide the necessary tension. But once you have a retractable hood of skin, various devices are needed to maintain enough tension on the "foreskin" to keep growing it. Of course, not everybody bothers with weights. They're content just to have a bit of covering over the glans'.

'But how are the weights attached?' Martin wanted to know.

Sandy had to keep himself from gasping as Tom stood up suddenly and began undoing his belt. Involuntarily, Sandy's head turned to look at the door with the small window in it, realizing suddenly why Everett had asked Jim to draw the curtain.

'Don't worry', Everett reassured him. 'No one's coming. It's just the janitor here this afternoon, and he always starts upstairs. We've never had a problem during show-and-tell'.

'Hey, slow down', Martin said. 'Sandy might not be used to this'.

Everett turned to Sandy and smiled earnestly. 'I know this might seem a little weird, Sandy, but we – well, learn from each other as we're going along'.

'Of course', Sandy laughed loudly. 'Hey, I've been to medical school'. He glanced around the room, but everyone's attention was on Tom as his khakis and underwear fell around his ankles.

(Moss 2010: 267)

This is a fascinating scene and one that perhaps confounds so many expectations about masculinity and groups of men. Theorists have long considered spaces of men being together to be about ‘dominance bonding’ (Farr 1988: 259; Messner 1989: 78), which refers to ‘a process of collective alliance in which members affirms and reaffirm superiority’ (Farr 1988: 259), for instance, the Old Boys Network, Locker Room Talk, and so on, and that may well be one interpretation, but there is also a strange friendship unfolding here. As readers, it is as if we are witness to a kind of pedagogy of the foreskin, with hands on demonstrations. The men are in a ‘safe space’ of foreskin restoration, wherein they are exploring their foreskin restorations together. Earlier in the novel, there is mention of *Foreskin Quarterly*, a pornographic magazine with a political purpose, namely, appreciation of the foreskin. In the winter of 1984, *Foreskin Quarterly* published its first issue. The publication was described as the ‘Official Publication of the Uncircumcised Society of America’, which had been founded on ‘July 4, 1976’ and was initially a ‘correspondence club for men to share their ideas about circumcision [...] both pro and con’. The first editor was Bud Berkely, who had also founded ‘the *Uncut America Newsletter*, [which] publish[ed] the experience and opinion of club members. [He] published the *Foreskin Finder List*, a membership directory for USA members. The uncircumcised had become united’ (Berkeley 1993: 45). Importantly, for Berkeley, from the outset, foreskin discussions were communal. The magazine itself is remarkably interesting given its exploration of and commitment to the politics of the foreskin, and while it began as a more grassroots magazine by the close of its publication it was deeply enmeshed in a more corporate model of pornography having been bought out.

To return to the scene, these men are sitting together looking at pornographic material about the foreskin, debating the foreskin, and looking at each other’s penises as they restore their foreskins together. How then, might a scholar of masculinity unpack this scene? My suggestion would be that it rewrites the expectations of men in groups, it confounds and confuses because, in part, it might seem so foreign to most men’s experiences.

In what remains, I wish to think here with recent articulations of masculinity, particularly shifting norms, to ask what theories of progressive and inclusive masculinities might offer to a novel such as this. Quite simply, is the scene above illuminating a new way to think about masculinity? It might be tempting to describe this scene as a kind of homoerotic space. In their critique of Michael Flood’s use of ‘bent straights’ in a study of Australian male youth, Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack explain, ‘it is our contention that labelling these behaviors as queer or transgressive is problematic as they have become normative among British male youth’ (2015: 223). In this scene, then, I think it would be misguided to read this as just being a queer scene, though I do think it might well be a transgressive one, after all, this is about a group of circumcised men seeking to restore their foreskins in a culture, the United States, that predominantly circumcises its male neonates. This scene can be read as an example of the complexity of homosociality. The homosocial need not be about the reinscription of male power and dominance, though this undoubtedly happens, but rather it is a complicated terrain in which masculinity is both performed and analysed. These men embody masculinity that they wish to understand, challenge and reform. As such, we might well read this scene of men looking at each other’s penises, and how well they are progressing in their foreskin restorations, as an interesting space that challenges some of the governing theories of masculinities, which render the homosocial as being

either about dominance bonding or as being queer and transgressive, always flirting with the homoerotic. There is something quite interesting happening in this space, one that is worthy of consideration, even if only happening in the fictional world.

These men imagine themselves growing together, in hopes of reclaiming and restoring their foreskins, while also coming to terms with their histories. I admit, like Sandy, a sense of discomfort reading this scene, but as a scholar researching the foreskin and circumcision, I am fascinated by the ways in which we might read this kind of scene, and it is certainly not an uncommon scene in foreskin restoration literatures, which range from the fictional, such as *The Measure of His Grief*, through to groups that meet regularly, to the communities that exist online on Twitter, Facebook and Reddit. These men are supporting one another in a very singular pursuit, the restoration of their foreskins, they share literature they have read (a point I wish to discuss) and they share tips and tricks. They bond over their foreskin journeys.

One final query, at least in this article, is that in the scene described in *The Measure of His Grief* is the mention of *Foreskin Quarterly*, a magazine that celebrated the foreskin with lush visuals, and included political, legal and cultural commentary about the foreskin. The publication thus had erotic as well as activist intentions. There is resolutely something queer about this magazine, which had an intended audience of men, most likely gay men. But in *The Measure of His Grief*, this group of men restoring their foreskins, are sharing news about the magazine, there is specific mention of articles. What then might it mean to consider this scene in light of those theories of masculinity that have long argued masculinity is dependent upon homophobia? My question here is motivated by a sense of confusion, this novel would confound how so many scholars think about masculinity insofar as the scene – admittedly fictional – seems to transgress the dominance bonding so central to ideas of homosociality and moreover, there is no homophobia on display. Instead, these men are being men together while discussing their penises and their foreskin restorations together. I am reluctant to call this a queer space, but undoubtedly something queer, which is to say, something that twists our expectations, happening. What might it mean for a group of straight men to consume and learn from a publication such as *Foreskin Quarterly* and to not frame this as latent homosexuality? This is an important question because so much work on homosociality imagines it is a 'segue' to homoeroticism and what 'might happen under the "right" conditions' (Foster 2014: 116). But that does not happen in this novel; instead, the pornographic text is pedagogical.

A recent study has noted that 'one in five heterosexual-identified men reported viewing SEM [sexually explicit material] that featured only men' (Downing et al. 2017: 1770). However, what is unknown from this study is the motivation for heterosexual men's consumption of these pornographies. In the case of *The Measure of His Grief*, the reasons are for learning about the foreskin and its restoration, and likely, though not certainly, less for titillation, excitement and arousal. In many ways, this scene deflates many ideas about masculinity, particularly in terms of what we might call an orthodox masculinity wherein men remain 'tactically and emotionally distant from one another' (Anderson 2009: 8). The scene, and I am struck by this, is marked by an 'absence of homophobia and homophobia, a lack of learned homophobic language, and no disgust for the male body' (Scoats et al. 2018: 40). The men do not pre-empt their interest in foreskin restoration by saying they are not gay nor do they read these magazines and firstly declare they are reading

it for the articles and not looking at the visuals. Indeed, given this example, it should hardly surprise, then, that anti-circumcision activists, not only have learned from gay men about the foreskin, but also have joined Pride marches to advance their activist causes.

In *The Measure of His Grief*, as much as the story is about foreskin and circumcision, it also explores the complexity of masculinity, especially in terms of what Michael Hames-García understands as ‘multiplicity’ which is ‘understood as the mutual constitution and overlapping of simultaneously experienced and politically significant categories such as ability, citizenship, class, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and sexuality’ (2011: 13) and he provides the following example:

The white gay man, [...] [m]y African American gay friend, and I all find ourselves situated differently in relation to homosexuality. In other words, it means something different for each of us to be gay. Yet *gay* is an important identity for each of us, and presumably we recognize the claim of others to be gay however much the meanings we associate with our gayness may differ.

(2011: 13, original emphasis)

In the case of *The Measure of His Grief*, despite the differences between these men, there is a commonality around the foreskin that brings those multiple identities together. Read reparatively, following Sedgwick (2003), *The Measure of His Grief* might have much to offer to the study of masculinity precisely because of this brief scene in which a group of men defy a range of normative and societal expectations, and instead, chart another course for masculinity. Admittedly, and importantly, all of this happens in the space of fiction, itself a relatively safe space, and as such I am reluctant to speak to this as real-life, lived, empirical evidence (I leave this task to social scientists better trained in fieldwork than I will ever be). However, it does seem to me that themes articulated in the novel are often similar to the themes articulated in spaces that have discussed foreskin restoration and anti-circumcision movements generally.

While *The Measure of His Grief* was published in 2010, it must be admitted that intactivism has only become more influential and more pronounced, scholarly work is actively studying the foreskin and circumcision. Jordan Osserman’s recent book, *Circumcision on the Couch: The Cultural, Psychological, and Gendered Dimensions of the World’s Oldest Surgery*, begins with an appropriate anecdote:

I was about to embark on a graduate program in psychoanalytic studies, and the idea to write one of my papers about circumcision came to me initially as a kind of joke. What if I tried to ‘psychoanalyze’ the odd intensity of anti-circumcision sentiment? I tweeted this idea, intending to be ironic. I received a reply from an intactivist organization, which didn’t hear the irony. They offered to share with me testimonials of men who felt traumatized by circumcision.

(2022: 1)

Circumcision, often imagined as a trivial matter, a quick snip, something people joke about, is very quickly becoming part of a larger discourse around genital autonomy and the rights of the child. Testimonials are published



about the harms of circumcision, such as, Lindsay R. Watson's *Unspeakable Mutilations: Circumcised Men Speak Out* (2014). A recent study found that, 'happiness with penile circumcision status is an important factor to consider for genital self-image and body exposure during sexual activity' and perhaps surprisingly also found that 'participants who were not circumcised reported significantly greater happiness than participants who were circumcised' (Selino and Krawczyk 2023: 1532). Discussions and scholarly research on circumcision are important because the decision to circumcise has consequences that extend beyond the prophylactic values that some suggest, and instead, has an impact on the men throughout their lives, as is evidenced by this scholarly study, as well as Watson's book of testimonials, and the novel *The Measure of His Grief*. Moreover, debates about circumcision are both ongoing and not new, for instance, the debate appears in *Sexology* magazine which ran from 1934 to 1975, as well as issues of *Hustler*, and gay men's magazines (Allan 2018, 2019, 2021). In the years to come, it seems that debates about circumcision will not end, and we will continue to see discussions of circumcision not just in scholarly literature, but in the popular zeitgeist, as well.

In this article, then, I have sought to read *The Measure of His Grief* carefully and critically with a keen eye on how it treats circumcision. Undoubtedly, this novel is against the practice of circumcision, but in so doing, the author affords her reader a journey alongside Dr Waldman who discovers a world unknown to him. Perhaps the reader is like Dr Waldman and had no notion of the politics of circumcision, let alone the world of foreskin restoration. In so doing, Lisa Braver Moss has provided readers with a resource, replete with references to other materials that enable a reader to have a greater understanding not only of circumcision and the foreskin, but also its restoration.

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